

Mexican Punitive Expedition

ASPJ STAFF



In 1911 the Mexican government was overthrown, and the country descended into civil war. Cross-border raids by Mexican revolutionaries and assaults on American citizens and property in Mexico heightened tensions. In January 1916, forces loyal to the bandit/revolutionary Pan

cho Villa killed 18 Americans in Mexico, and in March they crossed the border to attack the town of Columbus, New Mexico, killing eight soldiers and eight civilians. President Woodrow Wilson ordered American forces under the command of Gen John J. Pershing to pursue and attack Villa's forces in Mexico. On 15 March 1916, American troops crossed the Mexican border. Pershing's force included the newly formed 1st Aero Squadron, including eight aircraft, 10 pilots, 84 enlisted men, 10 trucks, one automobile, and six motorcycles. The air expeditionary era had begun. A few officers (e.g., Capt Benjamin D. Foulois and Lt Carl Spaatz) would gain important experience from this expedition.

Unfortunately, the early aircraft, training, and equipment were not up to the harsh operating environment. The 1st Aero Squadron's Curtiss JN-3s proved adequate as trainers but could not cross the 10,000-foot mountains in that part of Mexico; nor could they handle the frequent strong winds. The aircraft could carry a payload of only 265 pounds and had neither instruments nor weapons. Given the conditions under which it had to op



erate, the JN-3's high accident and incident rates came as no surprise. Maintenance was also a problem since the aircraft's wooden and canvas components suffered from the desert climate (especially the wooden propellers). After a month of operations, only two of the eight original aircraft were still operational, and even they were eventually condemned as unfit for service.

The squadron eventually received newer aircraft, guns, bombs, and cameras. The pilots benefited from a great deal of on-the-job training, but the squadron's main contribution to the campaign entailed carrying dispatches and mail. It recorded its most significant accomplishment when it located a lost cavalry column. The weaknesses of the US air arm rapidly became evident, as did many of the requirements for conducting a sustained air campaign. Steps taken to remedy these problems bore fruit less than two years later when the 1st Aero Squadron and the rest of the American Air Service entered World War I.

To Learn More . . .

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